

Rewards of Gardening with Children

National Association for the Education of Young Children @ <http://www.naeyc.org>

Help children plant a garden, and harvest their appreciation for the wonders of our natural world. From the first stage of seed selection, on through planting and tending to the garden, children develop a sense of pride and responsibility. They may also learn about math, writing, reading and science -- with your help!



Whether you're a parent or early childhood professional, take children to libraries and local greenhouses to find out what to plant and how to take care of it. Or have children ask family friends and neighbors about their gardening experiences. One discovery will lead to another. You don't necessarily need a green thumb to reap the rewards.

Gardening is a great activity for learning, whether you're in an urban or rural area. It's also a good way to involve parents and the whole school or community. You may put out a flyer or newsletter, and hold a meeting to discuss sharing responsibilities.

Parents or local organizations may even contribute soil or fertilizer to the project.

Decide whether you want to plant a square-foot garden, raised garden, or a conventional garden with rows, or a container garden made from empty milk cartons or flower pots. A garden need not be extensive or have dozens of kinds of plants. A barrel, a window box, or cut-in-half gallon jug will do nicely for a planter.

Whichever type of garden you choose, consider the climate and growing season before planting. Use sturdy, well-made tools and equipment. Shovels and hoes with short handles are easier for children to use than full-size tools. Adapt projects to adults' level of experience and children's ages.

Science and Nature

- 1) Begin by finding out which plants and flowers will grow best in your geographic location. Work together to set up the garden so that the particular varieties of plants and flowers you've chosen will grow best.
- 2) Plant a vegetable garden, and children can eat what they grow.
- 3) Talk with children about patterns and cycles they observe; ask them to make guesses about future changes.
- 4) Find out the names of insects that appear in your garden. Which ones are beneficial -- and which ones harmful to your plants?
- 5) Consider a companion project, like a compost pile. If you work together with your community, families may contribute grass clippings and kitchen waste. Children learn the value of recycling.

Reading and Writing

- 1) Build children's vocabularies by describing what you see happening in the garden.
- 2) Ask children to draw or paint pictures of plants as they grow, and write down what they observe.
- 3) Read stories to children about gardening, such as *The Little Red Hen* by P. Galdone (Clarion 1973), and *The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss (Harper & Row 1945).

Math

- 1) Count seeds with children, and measure the correct distance between plants.
- 2) Mark the calendar for the anticipated date of seedling appearance.
- 3) Keep track of the height of your plants as they grow.

Gardening is one way for children to learn through meaningful activities. The lessons children learn by "digging into" gardening will make for cherished memories of learning with adults. You'll watch children's sense of pride and accomplishment -- along with your garden -- grow!